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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: FARC DESERTIONS SLOW, BUT MILITARY REGAINS
MOMENTUM: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE FOR JANUARY-MARCH 2009

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) FARC desertions dropped nearly 20% in the first quarter of 2009, slowing for the first time since 2005. Kills and captures also fell. Still, some military officials believe that FARC desertions are starting to "cut to the bone," citing the defections of more senior members. The Colombian military scored several key successes, including an operation which disrupted the FARC's efforts to regain a presence in Cundinamarca. The military also thwarted FARC efforts to launch a large-scale attack during "Black March" to commemorate FARC founder Manuel Marulanda's death. Still, FARC operatives continued to inflict casualties using land mines, ambushes and snipers. The GOC planned to step up operations along Colombia's borders to try to choke off the FARC's and ELN's logistic and mobility corridors. The FARC, ELN and emerging criminal groups continued to cooperate in some areas while fighting in others. End Summary.

FARC DEMOBS LOWER, BUT CUTTING TO THE BONE?

12. (C) FARC demobilizations fell nearly 20% in the first quarter of 2009 compared with the first quarter of 2008, reversing a steady increase in demobilizations since 2005. Defense Ministry officials attributed the drop to the FARC's reduced recruitment capacity, as well as its increased control over new recruits. Of the 572 members of the FARC that demobilized during this quarter, 35% came from the Eastern Bloc and 20% from the Southern Bloc, where Colombian military operations were focused. The most common reasons for demobilizing were: mistreatment by superiors (30%), military pressure (26%), political disagreement (22%) and a desire for a lifestyle change (21%). 55% of the demobilized FARC members had been with the group for between 3-10 years. Some Defense Ministry officials believe the rise in more senior FARC defectors shows that demobilizations are starting to "cut to the bone" of the group.

ELN DEMOBILIZATIONS DOUBLE

13. (C) In contrast to FARC demobilizations, ELN desertions increased markedly this quarter. There were 155 ELN deserters, representing a 100% increase from the same time period in 2008. Nearly half of these demobilizations came

from the southwest departments of Narino, Cauca and Valle del Cauca. Defense Ministry officials told us the increase reflected clashes between the ELN and the FARC, the increasingly fragmented nature of the organization, decreased command and control, and a rise in political disillusion among the ELN's rank-and-file.

ARMY KILLS DOWN SHARPLY

14. (C) There was a nearly 70% fall in FARC kills this quarter compared with the first quarter of 2008, and a drop of more than 80% in ELN kills. Captures of FARC and ELN fighters were also down around 10%. Officials pointed to various possible explanations for these decreases, including: a) claims that commanders have become too cautious in the wake of the "false positives" scandals; b) insufficient fuel and other materiel -- only 14 days after the GOC's "Strategic Leap" was formally launched in late February, the Colombian military reportedly ran out of gas in the JTF-Omega theater of operations, bringing operations to a temporary halt; and c) claims that the hunt for high value targets was draining men and resources from other areas of the country. The reported drop in "false positives" may also have contributed to the decline.

BUT INITIATIVE REGAINED

15. (C) Still, the military scored several victories against the FARC, ending a lull of several months in which some questioned whether the GOC may have lost the initiative. A notable victory was Operation Fuerte, a joint police-military effort in February which resulted in the Army's capture of

Bernardo Mosquera Machado (alias "Negro Antonio"), the deputy commander of the FARC's Antonio Narino urban front, near Bogota. The Army also killed front commander Jose de Jesus Guzman (alias "Gaitan"), a 26-year FARC veteran, in the same region. The FARC had been driven from areas near Bogota under Plan Patriota in 2003, and the group was reportedly trying to regain a toehold near the capital. The military also uncovered a large complex of FARC camps, caves, bunkers, arms and explosives caches in Meta department. Defense Minister Santos told the media that these successes would force the FARC to "live like rats" in ever more isolated areas.

HVT HUNT CONTINUES

16. (C) Secretariat members Jorge Briceno ("Mono Jojoy") and Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas ("Alfonso Cano") continued to elude the Colombian military. They are constantly on the move in rugged mountains with heavy cloud cover, where the Colombian military's mobility is limited. The GOC hiked rewards for FARC Secretariat members to 5 billions pesos (approximately \$2.2 million) after receiving reports that Cano had ordered stepped-up attacks against the military in January. The Joint Forces Decisive Action Unit (FUCAD) and the Rapid Deployment Force (FUDRA) were in the JTF-Omega area during this quarter to pursue Jojoy. The FUCAD may remain there for the next 6 to 12 months, while the FUDRA will stay indefinitely. After the Colombian police successfully captured criminal group head Daniel Rendon ("Don Mario") in Antioquia on April 15--using 6 helicopters, 500 police and ISR platforms--some military commanders advocated a similar, focused search for high value FARC targets. Others were skeptical that such an approach could work in more rugged, jungle areas.

17. (C) Leading weekly "Semana" magazine reported in its March 7-13 issue that Mono Jojoy had lost ground, mobility and ability to lead, was reportedly ill, and had been dealt a heavy blow with death of his confidante "Gaitan." Although no Secretariat members were netted this quarter, the following commanders were captured or killed:

-- On February 19, police arrested Nelson Romero Sanchez (alias "Paramuno"), an explosives expert with the FARC's 51st Front, who was blamed for the January 27 Blockbuster Video

store bombing in Bogota, and also for bombings of Carrefour and buses in Cundinamarca.

-- On February 24, the army killed Daniel Vasquez Mendoza (alias "Diomer"), the finance chief of the FARC's 45th Front, with 14 years of experience. He was believed to have supplied funds to the Eastern Bloc and the 10th and 45th Fronts.

-- On March 26, Colombian authorities captured Jhean Carlo Ruano, (alias "Camilo") and Jaime Gomez (alias "Machete") for the March 7 bombing of the primary aqueduct serving Villavicencio, the capital of Meta Department. The act left over 300,000 people (80 percent of the population) without potable water for eight days. Originally, authorities attributed the bombing to the FARC's 53rd Front. Authorities now believe the individuals were members of the Anti-terrorist Revolutionary Army of Colombia (ERPAC), an illegal armed group led by narco-trafficker Pedro Oliveiro Guerrero ("Cuchillo").

-- On March 10, the army killed alias "Leonel," head of the FARC's "Victor Saavedra" front, a 25-year veteran, in Tulua, Valle de Cauca. He was second-in-charge of the FARC's Victor Saavedra Front. The front's militia chief was also believed to be captured in the operation.

-- On March 13, police captured FARC leader Eduardo Cabrera, reportedly in charge of narcotics trafficking for the FARC's Southern Bloc. He is the brother of "Fabian Ramirez," a member of the FARC Secretariat.

FARC'S "BLACK MARCH" A FAILURE?

18. (C) Security officials expected more FARC attacks during "Black March" to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the death of FARC founder Manuel Marulanda (alias "Tirofijo"), and tightened security throughout the country. A FARC plot to assassinate Minister Juan Manuel Santos by infiltrating his security detail was foiled by the police on March 25, and police intelligence units arrested a group of 15 alleged militants from the FARC's "Teofilo Forero" column. The same plot also planned to target Enrique Santos, President of the Inter-American Press Association and a former "El Tiempo" co-director. As part of "Black March," the FARC also tried to mount roadblocks in Meta, Caqueta, Putumayo, Santander, Guaviare and Cauca, with mixed success. Some analysts pointed to the FARC's inability to carry out a large-scale military operation during this time frame as evidence of its growing weakness.

BUT ASYMMETRICAL ATTACKS CONTINUE

19. (C) The FARC continued to use bombs, ambushes and land mines--between 60% and 70% of the casualties suffered by Colombian forces are the result of land mines. Minister Santos noted that attacks and bombs during this quarter were part of the FARC's ongoing "Rebirth" Plan, and designed to show that "the FARC is still alive and kicking." Still, he noted that "within the plan was an order not to confront the Public Force and avoid any combat." Some of the FARC attacks this quarter included:

-- On January 14, the FARC attacked a police station in Narino using gas cylinders filled with explosives, killing four children and one adult.

-- On January 16, the FARC detonated a 40-kilo car bomb in Neiva, damaging some 400 nearby businesses.

-- On January 27, the FARC militia bombed a Blockbuster video store in the heart of Bogota, killing two people.

-- In February 4, the FARC killed 17 Awa indigenous in Barbacoas, Narino, claiming they were collaborating with the Army.

-- On March 11, a bomb exploded near Villavicencio, Meta, killing two police officers. The FARC was blamed for the bombing.

-- On March 26, four people were injured when a FARC bomb detonated near city hall in Ipiales in Narino department. On the same day, the FARC burned a bus and two trucks transporting supplies into La Macarena, Meta and set up roadblocks as part of the "Black March" attacks.

-- On March 27, two Colombian police officers and 12 others were wounded in a FARC attack in Meta department in an attack on a police sentry station. On the same day FARC militants burned seven trucks carrying cargo from the Pacific port of Buenaventure in Valle del Cauca in an attack attributed to the FARC's 30th Front.

BORDER AREAS PROVIDING OXYGEN

¶10. (C) Defense Ministry officials complained about the lack of will in Ecuador and Venezuela to confront the FARC and ELN, who use the border areas to flee military pressure and to transport narcotics and weapons. Still law enforcement cooperation improved along the borders with Brazil, Peru and Panama. Minister Santos noted that a key component of the GOC's new "Strategic Leap" plan is to choke off the FARC's and ELN's logistics and movement in border areas. At least 9 members of the General Staff of the FARC are thought to be in Venezuela and two others in Ecuador.

ELN CONTINUE IN COLMIL SIGHTS

¶11. (C) The ELN continued to maintain a relatively low profile, but ambushed a police patrol in Norte de Santander on February 27. The attack killed three policemen and three civilians and wounded 15 others. Also, on April 18, two

police officers were killed and another eight wounded in Narino province when the ELN set off a bomb near a passing patrol. Still, the Colombian military enjoyed some success against the ELN this quarter, and the following commanders were captured or killed:

-- On March 5, police apprehend ELN leader alias "Lain" in Giron, Santander. He was the second in command of the ELN's "Bolcheviques" Front and had 16 years of experience with the ELN.

-- On March 19, police killed Javier Galvis Florez, alias "Mauricio," the commander of the ELN's "Bolcheviques del Libano" Front in Venadillo, Tolima. He was wanted for kidnapping and extortion, and was the subject of an extradition request for the kidnapping of Yesid Ceballos, a dual US-Colombian citizen in 2004. He had 18 years of experience with the ELN, and the front he commanded was believed to be nearly decimated.

-- On April 24, the Army arrested ELN leader alias "Nacho Leder" in Arauca, the second in command of the ELN's "Domingo Lain Saenz" Front.

ALLIANCES, TRUCES AND FIGHTING

¶12. (C) The ELN, FARC and emerging criminal groups (ECGs) continued to cooperate on narcotrafficking in some areas while battling for control of territory and lucrative drug trafficking routes in others. Some FARC fronts worked with Daniel Rendon's ("Don Mario") criminal group in northwest Colombia, and with Pedro Guerrero's ("Cuchillo") organization in Colombia's eastern plains. The FARC's 48th Front reportedly used the transportation network of Los Rastrojos to ship cocaine through Ecuador.

¶13. (C) Still, alliances changed quickly. The ELN and Los Rastrojos fought against the FARC in Narino and Choco, but clashed with each other in other parts of Choco. The FARC also fought with the "Aguilas Negras" ECG in Antioquia. On April 13, the ELN issued a communique asking the FARC to halt

all confrontations with the ELN. Medellin's El Colombiano reported on April 20 that a non-aggression pact between the two groups was broken in March in Bajo Cauca and Antioquia's eastern region, as the groups fought for control over local coca growers.

Nichols